"Rough Draft"

Thinking and Planning Ahead for Your Infant's Social Skill Development

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What are we looking for?

Social skills are defined as broad sets of behaviors that contribute to mutually beneficial social exchanges in communication and relationships. Clear as mud? Here's what we're looking for (*adapted from Gresham & Elliott's Social Skills Improvement System*):

Communication Skills

Social skills typically involve a meaningful exchange of "give and take" communication. Monitor yourself and your child's ability to "take turns" in a conversation by practicing "boomerang questions." For example:

"I like kitties, do you like kitties?"

The comment "boomerangs" away and back to the person communicating. Communication is basically a loop. The loop continues only if both parties take turns.

Cooperation

At the heart of all social skills is the desire to work with or accomplish a task/activity with someone else. The ability to cooperate and work nicely with others is basically a life skill. From school-age to the work place, we are asked to cooperate with others. This ability to "play nice" doesn't necessarily come naturally. Monitor yourself and your child's ability to "think about the other person." For example:

"Holy cow! This book is heavy! I could use some TEAMWORK to lift this book!"

Explain and practice what teamwork means: Working together to make something good (for everyone involved) happen.

Assertion

Nobody likes to get walked on. We all really want to exert some semblance of control in our lives. Little kids especially. Enable your child to "speak-up" for themselves. If they're having a hard time communicating verbally, teach them methods to be heard. Every one could use some help in advocating for themselves.

Remember, this goes both ways! The other side of this coin is "stubbornness." Monitor yourself and your child's ability to balance getting want you want when it's important and compromising when it is not.

Responsibility

This tends to get a lot of attention at home and school. Taking responsibility for one's actions is a big deal. Monitor how consistent you give consequences for BOTH good and poor behavior. Make sure that you're connecting the consequences to actions in a meaningful way. For instance, if your child hit some one at school and you decide to spank their bottom (minutes, or even hours after they engaged in the behavior) will they be able to connect the dots? Probably not.

Younger children in particular need immediate feedback about their behaviors both good and bad. Through a process called "conditioning" they can start connecting the dots from their behavior to consequences. Don't rely on "trial and error" all the time. Coach them and provide them with opportunities on purpose!

Empathy

The ability to "know what another person is thinking or feeling" is a complicated set of skills. It requires a) sustained attention, b) meaningful interactions, c) a desire to be accepted into a social relationship, and d) motivation to feel something you may not necessarily want to feel. Monitor yourself and your child and practice these series of skills to increase empathy towards one another.

Engagement

You can break down "social engagement" into two broad categories "Social Initiations" and "Social Responses." Monitor yourself and your child's ability to initiate a social exchange (i.e., greetings, requests, etc.) as well as your ability to respond to a social exchange (i.e., greetings,

non-verbal cues, etc.). Make a simple tally sheet of "+" and "-" for both initiations and responses. Try and increase the opportunities to practice for the both of you!

Self-Control

The ability to filter and/or "think before doing" is huge part of early development. Kids, by their very nature, are egocentric and impartial to other's wants and needs. Monitor yourself and your child's ability to pause, take deep breaths, and "filter" prior to acting. Design a specific routine wherein each of you can check-in with how you're feeling, what others are feeling, what you want to do, what others want to do, etc. Basically, figure out a way to apply a "Pro vs Con" method of thinking, for instance: "What will be awesome if I do this AND what will be not-so-awesome if I do this."

These are some basic strategies to help self-monitor and increase self-control.

Remember:

Focus on strengths early on. If you see your child's strengths in ANY of these areas, be sure to praise and reward it IN THE MOMENT! While these 7 categories are predictive of social skills and social competence (how others perceive their social skills), you and your child don't need to be experts in all the areas. Just try your best to identify strengths and weaknesses. Reward the strengths and take measures to minimize the weaknesses!

Work closely with pediatricians and school professionals to help coach and monitor social development. It's tricky, but it can be done with some creativity and access to evidence-based resources.